

# People, Labels and Stigma

continuing the work of Diana, Princess of Wales

*Dr Andrew Purkiss, Chief Executive of the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund gave the following address to the Annual General Meeting of Action for Prisoners' Families (formerly the Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups) on 17 October 2002*

**Why should the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund be committed to the cause of improving life for prisoners' families? Although the Princess was certainly personally interested in the plight of prisoners and, for instance, made repeated visits to Broadmoor, we probably do not remember the needs of prisoners' families as one specially associated with her. But the Trustees of the Fund decided at an early stage that they were not going to be restricted to the particular organisations or even the particular causes with which the Princess was associated during her lifetime. It was the inspiration, the spirit and the values of the Princess's work that the Fund existed to continue. Like her, we want to be there for new and emerging organisations, as well as established ones; and we want to help highlight neglected needs, as well as causes that are already familiar. We did give a substantial grant to every single voluntary organisation with which the Princess had ever been formally associated as Patron or President, but having done that we have for ever after thrown open our grants programmes on merit to any organisation which shows it can best address the needs which we set out in our published guidelines as our priority concerns — and that of course includes you, *Action for Prisoners' Families*.**

So what are the values of the Princess's humanitarian work which we want to continue? This has a lot to do with the title I have given my address today: 'People, Labels and Stigma'. The Princess had a natural genius for connecting with people — all people. She ignored the label and saw the person. And as part of that, she challenged stigma and she used her combination of celebrity and humanity to strike great blows against discrimination and prejudice. She had just as much time for a young homeless person or someone with mental illness as she had for cuddly babies. She took hours out of her planned schedule to talk privately to groups of recovering alcoholics. She made

the most humble, the most stigmatised people feel special. Pictures of the Princess sitting on the bed of a man very ill with HIV/AIDS, holding his hand, chatting naturally, smiling and laughing, helped transform public attitudes at a time when labels like 'The Gay Plague' and the ostracisation of people with HIV/AIDS was all too common. Similarly, when she stroked the limbs of someone suffering from leprosy in Indonesia, that did more to undermine the stigma and fear attaching to lepers than any number of practical projects.

From this inspirational achievement, the Fund has derived the following principles:

- ☐ we try to give priority to people and causes which would otherwise find it difficult to gain recognition and support;
- ☐ we are prepared if necessary to embrace unpopular causes and take risks; and,
- ☐ we are ready, where appropriate, to use the power of our name and our media profile to try to change public awareness and attitudes as well as supporting practical work.

We cannot be a charismatic Princess, but we can espouse those principles and continue to change lives for the better, and we believe that that is the best way of honouring the memory of Diana, Princess of Wales.

I think you will understand straightaway how these principles and values led us to take a strong interest in prisoners' families. It is not a cuddly cause. Prisoners' families often have huge difficulties in keeping their lives together and keeping going, let alone building a voluntary organisation and getting their voices heard. Their needs are poorly understood and the feeling of stigma can be strong. That is why we are so pleased to be working with you, challenging the stigma, and seeing beyond the labels to the human beings with the same natures, needs, hopes and dreams as everybody else, but with more complex difficulties in their lives than most others.

I am glad that we have been able to fund your very important three year project focusing on the



needs of young people with a family member in prison. We have also funded a scheme of small grants for your local member organisations, and I think some 13 grants were made in the first year of the scheme, ranging from start-up grants to capacity-building and new initiatives, between £500 and £4,000 apiece. We were able to help with some of the costs of enabling you to make the most of your tenth anniversary and I think we have facilitated a few rather useful new contacts for your Director [Lucy Gampell] in the corridors of power in Whitehall. We have enjoyed doing some media work together.

We were really thrilled to have a couple of very fine young people with experience of having a close relative in prison as two of our Young Voices, who spoke very powerfully and movingly to the assembled media to mark the fifth anniversary of the Fund recently, telling their story to the media and helping them to understand why these causes are so important and why it matters that the Fund is there to try to support them. At another level, I was delighted that, I think, three or four representatives of local groups and Visitor Centres were among those who attended a special media training session that the Media Trust put on for us. I think they found that a very empowering experience and insofar as they have messages that they want to put across through the media, I think they feel that they will have more confidence and contacts, and I do hope we can do some more of that in the future.

In all this, we have certainly formed a very high opinion of your work, the ability with which you have been influencing the agenda and understanding of policy making — although I know there is still a big mountain to climb. We also have a high regard for the way you have been able to strengthen the local network and attract resources from other funders, and prepare to establish the very important Helpline service from early next year. I do feel that these are very substantial achievements indeed when you consider all of the inherent difficulties of working in this subject area. Nobody wants to be complacent when the needs are so great and the experience of being a prisoner's family is still so awful for so many people, but it is also right to recognise and celebrate success and from that derive fresh energy and hope for further achievements in the future. If you keep going the way you have been, there will certainly be more important advances and achievements to come.

The agenda is certainly a big one. It's a bit of a cliché to ask what a Martian would make of it if he landed in our country in a flying saucer and decided because of Martians' sensible sense of

priorities to take an interest in prisoners' families, but I was never one to miss the opportunity of a good cliché, so here goes. He would probably wonder first why 71,000 people were locked up in prison in England and Wales, when so much smaller a percentage of the population is locked up in practically every other European country, not to mention much of the rest of the world. He would certainly not find that England and Wales were proportionately more peaceful and law abiding societies than the rest of Europe. When he found that despite the huge cost of imprisonment, nearly 60 per cent of prisoners are convicted of another crime within two years of leaving prison, he might begin to develop a hypothesis that people on this part of planet Earth seemed to have taken leave of their senses.

Knowing from his reading of the Social Exclusion Unit Report that strong family networks are such a hugely important influence in discouraging crime and in reducing re-offending, the Martian might well wonder why on earth we seem to be so keen on punishing prisoners' families and making it so difficult to maintain those vital family ties. Over two-fifths of prisoners lose contact altogether with their family while they are in prison. That is a terrible figure, but perhaps it is not so surprising under current circumstances. Prisoners are often situated either vast distances from their families, or where there is no public transport, or at the end of an arduous and complex journey, or all three. Many families are still not given basic proper information about visiting times or entitlement to financial help for prison visits. Fifty prisons in England and Wales still have no Visitor Centre at all. Nobody really feels responsible for prisoners' families. It is obvious to the Martian that prisoners' families are a very important resource in helping to identify and address prisoners' needs at different stages of their sentence, and particularly in preparing them for release. Instead of that, they are time and again viewed by the system as primarily a security risk or a nuisance. The Martian would at least expect the probation service to understand the importance of strong family ties and to integrate the family in the process of preparing prisoners for release and helping them to settle, but then he finds out that actually the probation service often does not really do this at all.

By this time, the Martian is beginning to think seriously about getting back into his flying saucer and trying another planet. But then he discovers to his relief that at least there is some good work being done in prisons to help young prisoners in their role as parents, carried out by the Prison Reform Trust with a grant from the Diana, Princess



of Wales Memorial Fund. However, when he turns his attention to the experience of prisoners' families in the community, his spirits begin to sink again. It is a story of stigma and labels. The system tends to label issues to do with prisoners' families as by definition the responsibility of the Home Office and the Prison Service because the word 'prisoners' appears in the label.

In fact the most important issues will often be, surprise, surprise, the main requirements of life in the community — income; education; housing; mental health and well-being; insurance ... yet, mainly because of stigma, the special challenges and needs of prisoners' families are often invisible and neglected. As the Social Exclusion Unit's report puts it: 'Training of staff in mainstream agencies is not tailored to cover issues facing ex-prisoners or their families'. I would go further and suggest that many mainstream services have not even registered that there are prisoners' families which have particular needs and difficulties which are highly relevant to the public services they need. For example, there are 125,000 children each year with a parent in prison, but most schools have no strategy for recognising and addressing their particular needs.

But — and this is the best bit of news the Martian has come across for some time — an

organisation with a name which he found difficult to understand or pronounce, has now changed its name to Action for Prisoners' Families and is on the case right across this large agenda. There are many inhumane, counterproductive and just plain barmy things about this country's treatment of prisoners and prisoners' families, but there has also been some progress. Bit by bit, the Federation's constructive engagement with the Prison Service is turning some problems around. Bit by bit, you are infiltrating the agendas of sundry mainstream agencies and the fact that prisoners' families do have problems is a good deal better researched and documented than it was even a few years' ago. Prisoners' families are getting a bit better organised and their voices are heard more often. It is quite something for an authoritative report published from within the Cabinet Office to set out an agenda which bears an uncanny resemblance to the policy statements of the then Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups. This might possibly have something to do with the fact that Lucy was an adviser to the Social Exclusion Unit team and exercised her very considerable persuasive powers. The Martian decides that all is not lost after all. Let us keep going. We share your commitment. We want to help see it through.

# Suicide and self-injury

## following release from prison

*Carole Shore, mother of Lester Shore, who killed himself on the day he left Pentonville made this contribution to a Howard League conference in November 2002.*

**Lester Christopher Shore**

**born 25 September 1966, died 14 July 1999**

**Lester Shore committed suicide within four hours of his release from Pentonville Prison on 14 July 1999. His condition on his release from prison was such that the prison booked a pre-paid taxi to take Lester from the prison to the Whittington Hospital. He did not get to the hospital. Indeed there was no reason to believe that he would because four days previously he had been taken to the same hospital suffering from malnutrition and dehydration. His 'frail' condition was giving cause for concern. He had refused treatment**

**on that occasion and been returned to the prison. On his final day he left the taxi provided within minutes of his release. He made his way back to Uxbridge where he had grown up. There he leapt to his death from the Cedars Car Park. His life ended at 6.21pm on that day. He was 32 years old.**

There is nothing that can be done to bring our son back, but there is much that can be learned from the circumstances of his treatment in prison and his subsequent death. As Lester was not in custody, his suicide triggered no automatic investigation. A Home Office spokesperson said when asked, 'The Home Office always looks into a death in custody but because Mr Shore died after he was